

In Good Company

Jim Knight

We were friends and mutual encouragers from Columbia College from the late '30s, and we never lost touch with each other. I don't know how, or why, it started, but we always called each other by our surnames; it was Merton, Lax, Rice (Ed), Gerdy (Bob) and Knight.

In single-minded desire, Lax always wanted to be a poet, and was always a poet; Merton was a lot of things – monk and mystic, author and thinker, writing mentor, fellow hitch-hiker, poet too, artist, peace advocate, and universal good guy. We always looked up to our elders, Merton and Lax, two or three years older, as our sophisticated and culture-wise role models.

Increasingly, during the summer of 1940, Merton isolated himself from the rest of us at the cottage turned over to Lax and us by Lax's brother-in-law, Benji Marcus, in the hills above Olean, NY. We were all gearing up to become writers; we all brought L. C. Smith or Royal portable typewriters and sat around in the main room of the rustic, drafty little house, each of us racing to complete more pages in a day than any of the others. Lax wrote about a travelling nightclub, something to be called "The Spangled Palace"; it later was published in our Columbia magazine, *Jester*, under Rice's editorship. Merton had started the summer before on an autobiographical book called at first, "The Straits of Dover," and then finally, "The Labyrinth." Rice wrote something called "The Blue Horse," about a race around the world. My text was untitled, an epic about the South.

The war came, and separated just about everybody who knew each other at that time, including our little group. Both Lax and Merton had made me a singular gift; each of them in his own way had broadened and helped establish my lifelong reading habits – which are among the more important habits one can have.

Lax and I came together again in Paris in the 50s. From General Vanier's Catholic Retreat, at Eau Vive, in the beautiful valley of the Loire (Lax was good at finding and living in places, from Olean to Eau Vive to his Greek island), he came and found me in the Rue de Berri at the *Paris Herald Tribune*. He brought a marvelous book of poetry, *Circus of the Sun* – and also Emil Antonucci, who did the design for that book. He also brought news of Rice and Rice's magazine, *Jubilee*. Lax fit into the Paris scene in a most un-American way; without even learning the language, he just blended into his surroundings. In fact, in Paris, he walked around in imitation of one of his poems – spare, lyrical,

loose-gaited but very firmly put together. He was in essence a big smile, and a quiet soft-shoe dance.

I telephoned him at the family home in Olean this summer when I learned he was back, and pushed hard for him to come and see Rice, who, because of Parkinson's, can't move from his house. "I can hardly get in and out of an automobile," he said. "As much as I would like to, it can't be done." I knew then we were losing Lax. "I am very happy in the house I lived in as a child," said the man who, I thought, would never move from his Greek island.

I'm sure Merton was thinking first of all of Lax when he dedicated one of his books like this: "This book is dedicated to all my friends / To the old ones and the new ones / To those who are near and those who are far away / To those on earth and those in Heaven / To those I know and those I have never met / To those who agree and those who disagree / To those I have never heard of / In the hope that we may all meet in the One Light." If that hope comes true, Lax will have added an unusual texture to that good company.

Jim Knight, a 1940 graduate of Columbia, served as news editor of the Paris edition of *The New York Herald Tribune* and as an official in the International Labor Organization, an agency of the United Nations. He is also author of the novel *The Master of Chambord* (1995).

* * * * *